



**SI Weybridge & District  
Special Edition  
Friendship Weekend Newsletter  
September 2024**



On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> September 9 sisters Huiby, Cathriene, Astrid, Ingrid, Corry, Joke, Rosemarie and Sybil from Almelo and Solveig from Silkeborg arrived at the Holiday Inn, Shepperton and were greeted by members of Weybridge and were offered crudités and Prosecco at the welcoming event.



On Friday morning the visitors were taken to **Hampton Court Palace** where they were given a conducted tour. Everyone was delighted when we awoke to blue skies and sunshine on the Friday morning: it was clear that our guests were going to see Hampton Court at its very best.





When we arrived at the Palace and met our guide, we realised that our day was going to be even more special: Lesley Ronaldson, a friend of one of our club members, who had agreed to show us round, had lived in Hampton Court for 27 years, due to her role as Chief Professional at the Royal Tennis Court. Lesley's insider view of life at the palace both today and in times past was fascinating and crammed full of facts about royal life there since Henry 8<sup>viii</sup> took it from Cardinal Wolsey in the 1530s. We were all particularly fascinated by the huge Tudor kitchens which had to feed a court of 800 people in Tudor times, with carefully demarcated food and table items according to one's social status.

Lesley also brought out the historical aspects which resonated most closely with our Soroptimist visitors. So, during our visit to the Great Hall, we were encouraged to imagine King James 1's wife, Anne of Denmark, who was a keen patron of the Arts, watching along with the rest of the court as Shakespeare's theatre troupe 'The King's Men' performed both Hamlet and Macbeth there in 1603.

Dutch history also came into the Hampton Court story, as Lesley explained that the monarchs William III and Mary II, 1639-1702, England's only joint monarchs, commissioned Sir Christopher Wren to build a new baroque palace on the site. William was a Prince of the House of Orange, and the House of Orange-Nassau continues to reign over the Netherlands to this day.

The tour culminated in a visit to the Royal Tennis Court where Lesley sought to explain the rules to us. We discovered that the original game of tennis was played in the streets so the tennis court mimics the layout of a street scene with a sloping 'roof' at the end and structures mimicking shop canopies at the side. A successful serve has to roll down the 'roof' and onto the 'canopy' before hitting the court.



After the tour, we went into the palace gardens where the glorious late summer borders were full of flowers and colour. Having eaten our picnic in the sunshine, we were able to enjoy the gardens until returning to our homes or to the hotel.

Later that evening we met up once again at the family home of former member Marjorie in Walton on Thames, by kind permission of her daughter, current member, Fiona and her brother. Marjorie had a special enthusiasm for the Friendship Link and some of our guests in 2024 remembered meeting her on previous visits, which made it very special to be able to meet at her home.

As we set up the tables and laid out the drinks and nibbles, there was a real sense of enthusiasm for meeting up with our 'new old friends'. Fiona and her daughter Alex produced fish and chip suppers and these, plus delicious deserts fortified everyone after a lovely day visiting Hampton Court and learning about the interlinked history of our countries.



## SATURDAY Morning

Saturday brought a trip the **Brooklands Museum**. We were greeted by 2 guides who took us into a private room where we were able to help ourselves to coffee, tea and cakes. After an introductory talk we were then given talks by 4 different ladies about pioneering women in flying and motor racing fields

First up was **Ethel Locke King**, who oversaw much of the track's construction at Brooklands and was a vital member of the Surrey division of the Red Cross during World War One.



Ethel was born in 1864 in Hobart, Tasmania. She had a not inconsiderable fortune but was not willing to satisfy herself with the normal pursuits of society ladies. She married Hugh Locke King in 1884 and they set off almost immediately to Cairo. It was here that they embarked upon their first adventure. Discovering an old hunting lodge, it seems to have been Ethel's idea to turn it into a hotel. This was duly done and this ambition was to rear its head once more in 1906 when Hugh decided to build a motor racing circuit at Brooklands. As a keen motorist it seems likely that Ethel encouraged this scheme. She travelled out to Turin herself to bring back her newly bought Itala 'Bambo', demonstrating her confidence and interest in driving matters.

Construction of the Brooklands track began in summer 1906 but by December, as costs mounted far beyond anticipated levels, Ethel was in charge. Letters between her and her associates show that she was taking extremely tough financial decisions about whether to cut their losses and lose everything or invest further, gambling with money they did not really have.

However, the track opened on 17th June 1907 with Ethel leading a single-file procession around the track in her Itala car, that is until the drivers broke rank and started an impromptu race around the world's first purpose-built motor racing circuit. Ethel raced again at Brooklands in the Ladies' Silver Bracelet Handicap in 1908, the first women's race at Brooklands, crossing the line in second place behind Muriel Thompson.

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### Hilda Hewlett

1st British women pilot & flying instructor (1864-1943). In 1910 at the age of 47 and with 2 children, Hilda Hewlett set up a flying school at the Brooklands motor racing circuit with business partner Gustave Blondeau. It was the first school in England to graduate a full-fledged pilot, and it was here on August 29th 1911 that Hilda became the first British woman to receive a pilot's licence. She went on to become a flying instructor, the first English woman to do so. The partners also set up business building aircraft for the Royal Aircraft Factory during the First World War. Hilda Hewlett still serves as a role model to other women all over the world and her achievements continue to inspire generations. Image courtesy of Brooklands Museum, Weybridge



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**Roberta Cowell** was born a boy in 1918, the child of a decorated war hero and surgeon to the king and she was a WWII fighter pilot and competitive racing driver, and the first known trans woman in the UK to undergo gender-affirming surgery. She flew Spitfires and Tiger Moths over the front-line and once crashed-landed in occupied territory. She was also known as "Betty".

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## Hazel Hill – the Spitfire Mathematician



Hazel Hill, the 13 year old daughter of Captain Fred Hill was instrumental in increasing the firepower of the Spitfire fighter in the lead up to the Battle of Britain during World War II. Captain Hill, working for the Air Ministry believed one improvement that could be made to increase the efficiency of the Spitfire would be to double the number of guns, from 4 to 8. Other people, however, thought that that would be too many and they would weigh the plane down. However, he was unable to do the calculations to make this work, instead reaching out to his 13 year old

daughter who was brilliant at maths. Working at home on the kitchen table the two of them came up with the calculations to add the extra 4 guns, an improvement which many have argued was a large factor in the RAF's victory in the Battle of Britain.

While we were enjoying the talks a lunch of quiches, ham, potatoes and salads and cakes was laid out and we helped ourselves to the delicious meal. We then had free time to visit the museum at our leisure. Everyone who was staying at the hotel went back and got ready for the gala dinner.

## Saturday evening

Our guests, Danny, Margaret, Fiona, AnnM, Brenda, Sue, AnnD, Alex, Alexis, MaryL, Hasina, Jeannie and AnnG all enjoyed an excellent 3 course meal with wine and Hasina gave a talk about her objectives regarding the situation in Afghanistan. This was followed by thanks from members of our friendship clubs who also gave us donations to put towards a project of our choice.





**We look forward to our next friendship visit which will be to Silkeborg next year.**



**KEEP SPARKLING**

